

NEWSLETTER

To keep women's words, women's works, alive and powerful — Ursula Le Guin



Louisa Lawson House A Feminist Alternative Mental Health Service in 1980s Sydney

I recently undertook my Honours year at the University of Sydney in the School of History and Philosophy of Science where I focused on the history of women and psychiatry. My thesis centred on Louisa Lawson House (LLH), a Sydney women's mental health service that served as an alternative to mainstream psychiatry between 1982 and 1994. Opened by a collective of passionate feminists in Sydney's south, it was the first mental health centre for women to open in Australia. Today, very few remember LLH. Yet, in its 12 years of operation it provided compassionate, feminist-informed care to hundreds, if not thousands, of women.

Named after Louisa Lawson, the Australian suffragist, mother to famous poet Henry Lawson and publisher who lived inside psychiatric institutions herself, LLH was instigated by a collective of feminists who were critical of the psychiatric system which, they argued, was grossly inadequate in helping women in distress. The collective aimed to set up a retreat where women could have the space they needed to work through emotional crises or bouts of mental ill health. Unfortunately, the collective struggled to obtain funding to realise this vision and instead LLH became a grassroots day centre. In 1982, the collective was granted premises in Arncliffe by the NSW Housing Commission and LLH was operated by volunteers until it became funded by the Health Department in 1985. The centre's primary service was one-on-one counselling but it also served as a drop-in day centre providing a safe space for women in the community. Additionally, it offered weekly workshops and classes on yoga, meditation, assertiveness, conflict resolution, anxiety, and more. In 1986, the centre opened a minor tranquilliser clinic



A workshop held at Louisa Lawson House in the late 1980s

to assist women in withdrawing from the addictive tranquilliser pills that were all too common at the time. As the centre's reputation grew, its services were in high demand and the counselling waiting list grew, often extending over months. The success of LLH was a testament to the fact that

it was fulfilling needs not met by other services. Unfortunately, conflict between the collective and government officials regarding the centre's management saw its closure in 1994.

I wanted to explore the history of LLH in my thesis because of its relevance to the history of Sydney feminist action and because of the novel centre it was. Central to my research was the LLH archives housed at the Jessie Street National Women's Library. These archives are truly a treasure trove. Within these 26 boxes I found beautiful hand-drawn posters, delightful letters of support for the centre from clients, meeting minutes describing lively exchanges, impassioned letters to government officials demanding more support, and so much more.

I was also lucky enough to interview some former staff members who offered their rich insights and memories. If any readers have personal experience of LLH from its day, as a client, volunteer, or as staff, I would love to hear your experiences and memories. You can contact me through the Library.

One of the big lessons I have taken away from my Honours year is a reverence for women's power when they come together to achieve collective goals. I have such deep respect for the women who campaigned for, and successfully ran, LLH. Not only were these women bold enough to stand up against the mainstream psychiatric system they had observed, they were also passionate enough to establish their own alternative service which fulfilled a crucial need for women-centred mental health care.

Further demonstrating the strength of women when they combine forces and work together is the team who run the Library. These passionate and skilled volunteers keep women's voices and stories alive. I thoroughly enjoyed coming in for my research and I am so grateful to the women who run the Library for their support.

Eloise Watts

You are invited to the Annual Luncheon at Parliament House on 11 September. Booking form and raffle tickets are enclosed. The booking form will also be available on the Library website from 21 July.

Lunch Hour Talks

Venue/Time: 12.00-1.30pm
Customs House Library, 31 Alfred St, Sydney
— on Circular Quay

Enter via front of Customs House
Cost: \$20 (members) \$25 (non-members)
including light lunch. Pay at the door. Book
by noon Monday before the talk. Ph (02)
9571 5359

Thursday 24 August – Dr Lenore Coltheart OAM

Lenore will update us on her progress with her work on a biography of Jessie Street. She said, 'For this audience I'd love to talk about writing the biography – writing about Jessie Street adds all sorts of fascinating (and frustrating) layers to the challenges of contemporary biography – an audience of insiders will get this in a way the readers of the biography will not – and should not'.

Thursday 19 October - Nadia Wheatley

'2023 marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charmian Clift — essayist, memoirist, novelist, journalist, script-writer, dreamer, and political thinker. As we celebrate this centenary, the author's reputation and readership are growing, as is her backlist of works in print — in Greek and Spanish as well as English.

Towards the end of last year a group of Clift fans got together to discuss how to mark this significant milestone.' The first proposal to be realised is a dedicated Charmian Clift website: www.charmianclift.com.au and among the many other events planned, Nadia will give October's Lunch Hour Talk.

Annual Luncheon raffle prize donation

This year we are delighted to announce the generous donation by the late Mary Potter, a longtime member of the Library, of a unique Suzanne Bellamy porcelain decorated figure as second prize in our raffle. The ceramic sculpture, valued at \$1000, is titled 'The Independent Scholar' and was created by Suzanne in 1989.

Suzanne Bellamy (1948-2022) was an Australian feminist pioneer, activist, artist and independent scholar who was a published scholar of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. She was an internationally exhibiting sculptor, potter and printmaker whose quintessential free spirit is embodied in her art.



Raffle prizes

1st Prize: Luxurious getaway at Sofitel Sydney Darling Harbour, voucher to the value of \$1500, donated by Teachers Mutual Bank.

2nd Prize: Ceramic sculpture by Suzanne Bellamy, *The Independent Scholar*, value \$1000, donated by the late Mary Potter

3rd Prize: Bespoke sterling silver jewellery designed and made by Connie Dimas Jewellery, value \$550

4th Prize: Visa Cash gift card donated in memory of Marie Muir, value \$350

5th Prize: Captain Cook Top Deck 3 course a la carte Lunch Cruise for two, value \$200

6th Prize: Sparkling High Tea at NSW Parliament House, value \$150

7th Prize: Gift voucher for Gleebooks, value \$100, donated by Gail Hewison

8th Prize: Signed book, *Everything you need to know about The Voice* by Megan Davis and George Williams; and a bottle of wine, value \$50

9th Prize: Signed book, *Staging a Revolution*, by Kath Kenny; and a bottle of wine, value \$50

10th Prize: Signed book, *The Book-binder of Jericho*, by Pip Williams; and a bottle of wine, value \$50

All wine produced by Kurri Kurri TAFE and donated by NSW Teachers Federation

Jessie Street National Women's Library

Australia's National Women's Library is a specialist library, its focus being the collection and preservation of the literary and cultural heritage of women from all ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

Aims

To heighten awareness of women's issues.
To preserve records of women's lives and activities.
To support the field of women's history.
To highlight women's contribution to this country's development.

Patrons

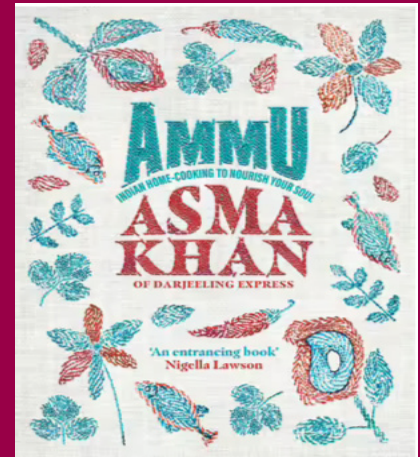
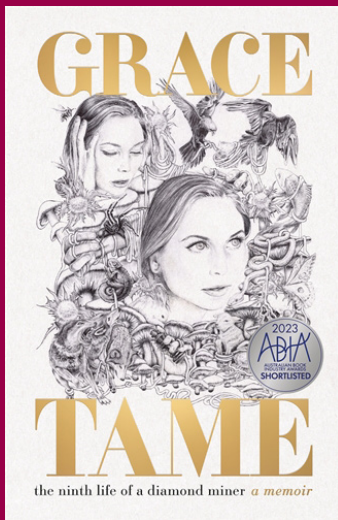
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Editorial Team

Kris Clarke, Jessica Stewart, Jan Burnswoods, Editors; Tinderspark, Graphic Design.



Sydney Writers' Festival 2023

Earlier this year, I spent four days as part of the body of volunteer workers at the Sydney Writers' Festival and soaked up the bonhomie that comes from readers and writers gathering to talk about books. The Festival is still emerging from the Covid years: mass events are still approached with caution, international travel is down and it was a smaller affair than usual.

There were many women writers this year and I caught Pip Williams who spoke eloquently about her new book, *The Bookbinder of Jericho*, set in the same world as her earlier bestseller, *The Dictionary of Lost Words*. This new work brings to life the women who worked in the press, binding books. Grace Tame, whose memoir, *The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner* has just been released, spoke on a panel with two other women about being true to your real self and I am in awe of this woman's self-possession. I salute her refusal to sit back down, and be nice, when confronted with hypocrisy.

I also saw a conversation with the playwright, Suzy Miller and actor, Heather Mitchell (pictured above) whose performance of Ruth Bader Ginsberg in the monologue: 'RBG: Of Many, One' received standing ovations when it played last year for the Sydney Theatre Company. Suzy Miller spent many many hours in research, reading Bader Ginsberg's cases. Listening to Suzy Miller, I understood, for the first time, why Bader Ginsberg did not resign during Obama's terms to allow him to make a younger progressive appointment. Her legacy, she said, is her decisions, and as long as she was making them, she created precedent that will impact the lives of women and girls for decades into the future. Miller's earlier work, *Prima Facie*, is also a one-woman show about structural bias against women in the legal profession. It has won numerous awards and a filmed version is now used in professional development in the legal world.

But perhaps the most astonishing and unexpected event was the cook and restaurateur, Asma Khan, who has written a memoir and cookbook, *Ammu* (Ebury Press 2022). The name is in homage to her mother whose food she adored growing up. 'I was never interested in cooking. I just wanted to eat!' Her self-declared status as a child who was 'too fat and too dark' to marry well meant she went to university instead, emerging with a doctorate and a career in law ahead of her. She moved to England with her academic husband (yes, she said, she did find one after all) but there, cold and hungry, lonely and desperately unhappy, she decided things had to change. She longed for the smell of cinnamon in hot oil, the spitting of mustard seeds, and to share the love of family and food which she had lost. She returned to India to capture her mother's recipes and learn to cook. 'If I can feed people, maybe I'll make friends.'

Her new career took a series of hilarious turns, from running an underground restaurant at home — 'I've always wanted to do something illegal' — to opening a pop-up in a pub and trying to lure its beer and chips patrons to try something new. Indian food, she said, was dreadful when she arrived in the UK with its lurid colours and surfeit of cream. She wanted to bring an authenticity. After many failures, her restaurant, the Darjeeling Express, finally got a favourable write-up and today is famous. Her all-female restaurant crew is the same group of immigrant women who first gathered to eat and reminisce in her early years; its success, she says, is theirs as much as hers. Her family is now very proud of her after many years of utter bemusement — 'I could have been a lawyer. Why did I want to *cook*?' Asma Khan had us in stitches throughout and her book sold out of the Festival bookshop before I could lay my hands on it. It's on order!

Jessica Stewart

Lunch Hour Talk

Pram Factory births Feminist Theatre

25 May 2023

Kath Kenny

In interviewing second wave feminists for her PhD, Kath was shocked to discover that newspaper employment columns were divided into male and female categories and that women were banned from public bars in hotels. In the 60s, women made up only 25% of undergraduates. There were no women in the House of Representative until 1974. But once women began to speak up, change came quickly.

She discovered that the cultural renaissance triggered by women's anger in the 60s extended into many areas of creative expression including rock bands, exhibitions, novels and theatre. She used her material to publish a book on women's theatre, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first feminist play, Betty Can Jump.

In her book *Staging a Revolution: When Betty Rocked the Pram*, Kath poses the question Why has the cultural renaissance of women's liberation been forgotten? To those of us who lived through that time, it seems that our cohort has never stopped fighting for equality and justice. Our Library was founded by women who wanted to preserve women's words for future generations. Thanks for this timely re-examination of feminist history, Kath!

The Pram Factory (1970 -1981) was a small alternative theatre in Melbourne in a repurposed factory. The Pram Factory Theatrical Group wrote and performed experimental plays that showcased the Australian way of life. Kath showed slides of then unknown young actors at Pram Factory rehearsals, including Kerry Dwyer, Helen Garner, Carmen Lawrence and Claire Dobbin. Later the Australian Performing Group (APG) comprised both Melbourne and Monash University students - Kerry Dwyer, Graeme Blundell, Bill Garner and Secondary Teachers College students - Max Gillies, Claire Dobbin, Evelyn Krape. However, the first APG play arrived in the rehearsal room with five parts for men and only one for a woman though there were equal numbers available for casting.

Many APG members joined in demonstrations to protest Australian participation in the Vietnam war. APG was anti-capitalist, pro-soviet 'agit-prop' theatre. The group did factory tours, supported unions and performed at May Day events. Conservative governments enacted censorship and arrested players for obscenity. Despite the radicalism, at the Pram Factory things seemed very backward for women. Behind the scenes women's rebellion was incubating.

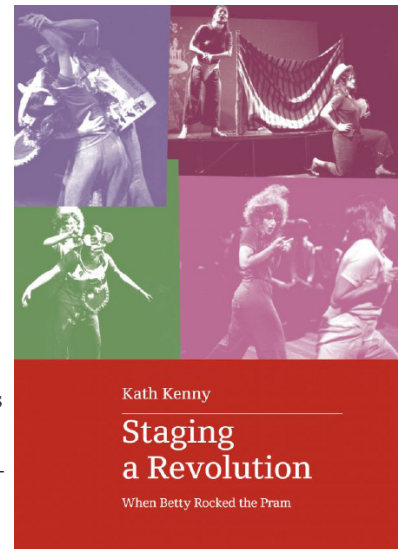
Kerry Dwyer told Kath that she felt 'enraged' by stereotypical characterisation of women in the early plays such as David Williamson's *Don's Party* where she was cast as a bimbo girlfriend. Dwyer wondered why women could not write or direct plays. She was joined by many women whose outrage seeded Australia's earliest women's liberation groups.

The Carlton Women's Liberation Group began meeting in Helen Garner's lounge room. She and her pregnant friend Kerry felt sidelined by their partners who gave them little domestic assistance. They met with American actress Maggie Helmer, a member of a radical theatre group who wrote *How To Make a Woman*, the first play of the American Women's Liberation Movement.

Inspired by Maggie's play, Kerry and Micky Allan invited women to come to the Pram Factory to develop a play about women's lives, giving rise to *Betty Can Jump*. The title was inspired by a 1951 children's early reader *John and Betty*, which reinforced gender stereotypes. The play was directed by Kerry Dwyer, Graeme Blundell and Bill Garner. The all-female cast members were Helen Garner, Yvonne Marini, Jude Kuring, Evelyn Krape and Claire Dobbin.

Having researched Australian women's history, the group uncovered suppression and violence against women dating from the beginning of colonial settlement. When *Betty Can Jump* was finally staged in 1972, it featured frank monologues about men, sex and how the actors felt as women. The audience laughed and cried. Helen Garner reported a number of women saying 'You've said things I never knew anyone else thought except me'. Revelations on stage about women's inequality led to men beginning to share chores! Max Gillies did a big show of cleaning the toilets before going on stage. Greg Pickhaver took over the care of the children whilst their mothers performed.

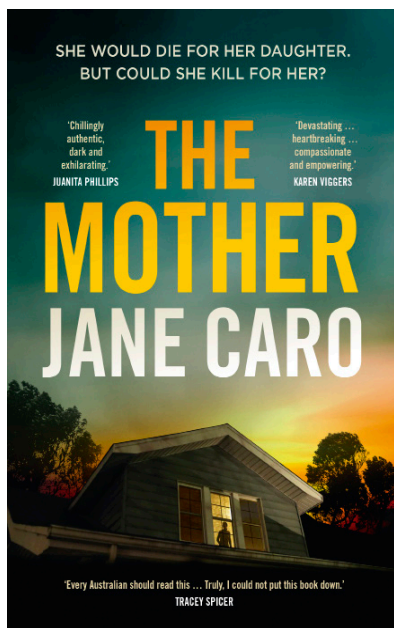
Small steps you may say, but the women's movement was to have a lasting impact. And it still does.



Barbara Henery

The Mother

Jane Caro



Though I knew the gist of the issues raised by *The Mother* before I began – I'd read the devastating stories of victims of domestic violence, watched the news and thought I understood the issues – this novel still shocks.

Its first words tell you that this middle-aged woman in a puffer jacket could be any one of the women at the

school gate, at the deli, in the post office. Could it be you or someone you know? Furious at the inaction on women and children killed by their former partners, Jane Caro wrote *The Mother*, her first novel for adults, and it's a fast-paced, edgy read. Caro is also a Walkley Award-winning journalist and often comments on contemporary issues.

Barely a week passes without news of another woman killed in circumstances where police knew the prior history of violence and the threat of further harm, where restraining orders had been breached, where the woman had left the relationship, sought refuge, but was menaced, hunted down and killed. *The Mother* shows the threat escalation by men (and yes, they are all men) who appear ordinary, and the ways they normalise and rationalise their control.

Miriam's younger daughter, Ally, is engaged to be married after a short romance. She seems wholly besotted with Nick, who moved into her flat 'almost as soon as they'd met'. He establishes himself firmly in Ally's life, and Caro plants an early warning when Miriam can't recall seeing her daughter alone since Nick's arrival, but the signal is too remote. She doesn't see what's coming.

The first half of the book brings the reader up close to Ally's unfolding loss of control as she moves to the country with Nick, separating from her friends and family, and where life begins to revolve around him entirely. She gives up her car, abandons her studies, adopts new habits, and is now only known by his new nickname for her, 'Sonny'. Soon she is pregnant. Nick ramps up his control, questioning her mental health, gaslighting her, keeping Miriam at a distance.

Miriam becomes worried. Caro draws out the tension between acting or not, believing one's gut or accepting what one is told, turning against one's better instincts. Early in the book, Miriam's husband, Ally's father, dies. Amid her own grief, it is harder for her to see her daughter's changed behaviour.

And Nick was lovely, everyone had agreed. The busyness of our lives, the feeling of disbelief that this could happen, the isolation of our nuclear families and lack of community all contribute to a collective blindness to violence. It makes it hard to see changes in someone we thought we knew. Is this behaviour normal? It is not a coincidence that Jeremy, one of the few people to call out Nick's behaviour, is a new friend of Ally's in her small town; he has no stake in preserving the fiction of Ally's life.

When Ally is finally able to access the resources to leave, we are only halfway through. The second half portrays law enforcement's ineffectual swats at Nick's repeated stalking and harassment. It evokes well the suffocating fear, the curtailed lives, the imprisoning of the victims.

When first faced with the extent of Nick's rage at Ally's flight and his loss of control, Miriam feels desperately tired. It wasn't her fight. Her helplessness in the face of the lack of support, the feeling of having lost the ground beneath her feet, allows blame to settle where it is least deserved. 'But if he's making her so miserable,' she says out loud, 'why doesn't she just leave?' Then she blames herself:

Recognition of coercive control as domestic violence, as abuse, has been slow, the necessary legal reform and policy changes to protect its victims glacial. *The Mother* brings its pervasive and systematic destruction of lives to life.

Jessica Stewart

Edited version of review published in Newtown Review of Books, May 2022

Contribute to the Newsletter

The Newsletter editors are seeking your help.

We would love to hear from you if you can attend our Lunch Hour Talks a few times a year and write a report of up to 650 words. New voices are very welcome!

Have you done any proofreading and would like to proofread the Newsletter before it goes to print?

Finally, if you have any experience in using InDesign and would like to assist with layout at the Library, please get in touch with us at our Newsletter email: jsnwl.newsletter@gmail.com

The editors

Vote Yes for the Voice

The Library has officially endorsed the campaign for a Yes vote in the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament being held later this year. A formal resolution of support was carried at our Annual General Meeting in April.

Members and supporters will have the opportunity to hear Professor Megan Davis speak about the issues at our Annual Luncheon in September. She is a Cobble Cobble woman and has been a leading proponent of the Voice since her role in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017.

It is worth remembering that the last time Australians were asked to recognise and support Indigenous people, in 1967, 90.77% of Australians voted to amend the Constitution to remove limitations on Commonwealth power in Aboriginal affairs and to count Aboriginal people in the census.



Jessie Street played a major role in the lead-up to the 1967 referendum. As South Sea Islander activist Faith Bandler remembered it, Jessie 'rang me up late one night in 1956 (she always rang very late or very early) and said in her lovely, cultivated voice: "You can't get anywhere without a change in the Constitution and you can't get that without a referendum. You'll need a petition with 100,000 signatures. We'd better start on it at once." And we did. Jessie's role in our movement was absolutely vital.'



Jessie Street, Faith Bandler (left), Shirley Andrews and a number of other women were deeply involved in the campaign that led up to the referendum, although the cause had a long history, right from when the Constitution came into effect in 1901.

Jessie Street became initially involved in Aboriginal affairs through feminist networks, especially the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the United Associations

of Women, which began to develop policies on Aboriginal welfare in the 1930s. At the United Nations and elsewhere during the 1940s and 1950s she linked these issues to the situation of colonised indigenous peoples around the world. Following publicity about scandalous treatment of Aboriginal people in Western Australia, which generated outrage among many Australians, she was asked by the Anti-Slavery Society in London in 1956 to investigate conditions for Aborigines in Australia. The formation of organisations in many parts of Australia, and Jessie Street's tireless networking, resulted in the combination of eight bodies in 1958 to form the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, later FCAATSI.

After the Yes vote on in 1967, FCAATSI president Joe McGinness cautioned: 'Winning the referendum is an important step forwards — but it is only a first step ... the government is showing no hurry to legislate for us on education, housing, wages, trade training, land grants and many other things we need'.

How right he was. Now, 56 years later, Australia has another chance.

Jan Burnswoods

Donations

General donations since May 2023

Christine Jennett
Myra Keay
Deborah Nance
Pippa Preston
Maureen Ward

Donations of material

Bronwen Hickman
Jane Pollard
Jenna Woodhouse
Spinifex Press

New members

The Library welcomes Helen Ward as a new member.

Capital Investment Fund

Since it was launched in September 2009, the Capital Investment Fund has reached \$633,051. Our target is \$1,000,000, which will provide essential support for Library operations. If you would like to contribute, please indicate on the membership/donation form.

CIF donations since May 2023

Pippa Preston

and we will contact you.

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Note: Please advise the Library if your contact details have changed.

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Enter through the Ultimo Community Centre, Bulwara Rd
Please use the intercom for admittance

Opening times:

The Library is open to the public Monday to Friday 10 am to 3 pm

Borrowing policy:

The public can access items using the interlibrary loan system. The public cannot borrow items but may use them in their library of choice.

How to reach the Library:

- * The Library is a 20 minute walk from Town Hall Station through Darling Harbour or from Central Station via the Goods Line walk or via Harris Street
- * Bus 501 (Railway Square to Ryde/West Ryde) at Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre stop
- * Bus 389 (Maritime Museum to North Bondi) at Harris and Allan Streets stop
- * Light rail from Central Station or Dulwich Hill to Exhibition stop
- * There is limited two hour street meter parking available

Postal Address:

GPO Box 2656
Sydney, NSW 2001

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